

Reepham Market Place 1902–1920

The story of Reepham Market Place in the early years of the century as seen by the eyes of a child

Reepham, having a cattle market, liked to term itself a town. The centre of that town was indeed the Market Place and so it was the vital centre and always referred to as “The Town”. Even today the older generation will remark that they are going in to “the town” to shop, or across “the town” if proceeding further or even meeting someone in “the town”. It has many nostalgic memories for me – indeed I have a very affectionate regard for it. It was the centre of most activities since the parish council (of Hackford only in those days) consisted mostly of residents of the Market Place.

It had street lamps of a kind, about four lanterns attached by iron brackets to the walls in various dark corners. These contained oil lamps complete with chimneys and a lamp lighter was employed by the council. He was responsible for keeping the lamps filled, trimmed and he lighted and extinguished them at the appropriate times. They were not used at all during the summer months. The only lamp lighter I can remember is Mr James Wasey. During the First World War the lamps were not lit at all and in the dark winter evenings I used to walk to Guides with a cycle oil lamp.

The social life of the Market Place was almost a community in itself. Messrs Austin (butcher), Fisher (grocer and draper), Hall (saddler and harness maker), Peck (general stores), Cocking (shoe sales and repairs), Riches (high class grocer) and Gibbs (ironmonger and seed merchant) all had premises in the Market Place. They were all members of the parish council and most of them served on various committees that were formed from time to time.

One of the highlights of the year was the fair on June 29th and I can remember the excitement of us youngsters when the Market Place was invaded by vans, roundabouts, coconut shies, shooting galleries and stalls selling home-made rock of many flavours and much stickiness. They usually stayed for a week to the delight of the younger generation, although the adults were glad when they left owing to the noise and many other inconveniences. Stalls were gay and lighted by paraffin flares. The majestic engine with its shining brasswork was admired and wondered at by everybody as it provided the power to run the roundabout, the organ with its repertoire of tunes and current for the lighting system. The organ was also a strain on the pockets of the youngsters for pennies, which often had to be supplemented by a visit to their parents two or three times during the evening! The vans were drawn up side by side on the King’s Arms plain facing the road and the horses were put to grass on the meadow. We used to visit the “fair people” and take them fruit and vegetables, since my mother always remarked, “Poor things, they have no

gardens.” One family came year after year and we would be asked in to the van, so spotlessly clean – a wonderful house on wheels and I wished I lived in it! People would throng in from the surrounding villages and make it a real frolic. I was told to be home by 9 pm for bed, but I would lie awake listening to the organ playing its repertoire of the topical tunes of the day and waiting for *God Save the King* at 11 pm.

Disturbing the quiet of the week, each Wednesday saw scenes of much activity when market day arrived. Farmers drove in with their horses and traps, the latter of various shapes and sizes. The horses were taken out of the shafts and stabled at the King’s Arms or The Sun, though some preferred the lesser hostelries such as the Lord Nelson, The Greyhound, Duke of York or George and Dragon. The carts were parked on the Market Place or in the yards of the selected stabling.

Farmers used to congregate to talk to each other and exchange views and farm gossip, bargain with the merchants to sell their corn or go to the bank for wages and do most of their farm shopping at the local ironmongers and agricultural engineers. If the sale yard was too full, calves and sheep would be kept there until such time as there was room in the sale ground. The Market Place was the central meeting place of everyone.

On Sundays, the Salvation Army band would hold services in the Market Place, afternoon and evening. The band was very good in those days. Two army officers were in charge and the army had a good cause here. I would always run to the window to see them march by as they paraded to the barracks in Norwich Road via Back Street – that is, if I were not in Sunday School in the afternoon.

The Market Place set the scene for another “once a year” occasion. The Oddfellows held a district church parade, usually on Whit Sunday evening, when men, and in some cases their wives, came in from various lodges, arriving by wagonette, horse brake, horses and traps or bicycle. The men met at 6 pm in the Market Place, looking very impressive in their various coloured sashes, and following a very imposing banner bearing the symbols of the Oddfellows, they would march to church via Back Street.

In those days, the churches were not amalgamated, and I think the Oddfellows’ service was held alternatively in St Mary’s and St Michael’s. After the service they would again parade with the band (usually the Dereham Volunteers’ Band), proceeding along Norwich Road, Reepham Moor and Cabbage Court (now New Road) to Station Plain and back to the Market Place via Station Road, collecting money en route. They would then disband and repair to either the King’s Arms or The Sun to “wet their whistles”. As a child this was a highlight and my mother would entertain one or two of the wives during the parade and we would keep open house

with coffee and cakes for anyone my father or my brother brought in afterwards. It was a "treat" for me to be allowed to stay up to watch the parade after church.

I cannot recall the coronation of Edward VII but to celebrate this I believe marquees were erected on the Market Place and the whole village attended a feast of cold salt beef and pickles (I don't think salads were so fashionable then), with plum pudding to follow. As a souvenir every child was given an enamel mug bearing the picture of King Edward and Queen Alexandra.

Another feature of life in the Market Place during the winter months was the weekly dancing class held in the King's Arms club room. I envied my sister and brother who were old enough to attend this very popular pastime. Most of the young ladies and young farmers from the district attended (even Mr Peck, though not so young!). The culmination of all this was the annual dance, held in the same place. Miss Boon supplied most of the music on the piano and the dance usually finished by midnight.

The King's Arms had a flourishing bowls club, well supported by the Market Place residents.

Another daily event in the Market Place comes to my mind. At 6 am the people living there were often awakened by the arrival of the mail cart and its noisy driver. The cart was like an ordinary heavy trap, with a covered-in portion behind for the bags of mail, and was red. The horse was given a nose bag while the driver knocked up the postmaster. He came every day including Sunday.

At the turn of the century the cottage which is now situated next to Ewings the estate agent, was the Parish Reading Room. This was run by a committee, most of whom were parish councillors, with Doctor E V Perry as chairman. Downstairs was a public room with daily newspapers and a number of periodicals such as *Tit-Bits*, *Pearson's Weekly* and *Exchange and Mart*. A number of monthly magazines were available along with the *Illustrated London News* and *Punch*. Upstairs was a library that consisted mainly of second-hand books which had been collected from various sources over the years. There was another larger room upstairs which contained a full-sized billiard table; this was mainly patronised by the younger men and boys while their more sedate elders read the papers and smoked in comparative peace downstairs. In 1911 Mr Sam Bircham leased part of Hackford House to the reading room committee and all the papers, books, furniture and equipment including the billiard table were removed to these much more suitable premises. The old reading room remained empty until the war when it was used as a billet by soldiers based in Reepham.

During the war, the Town Hall (known in those days as the Old School) was used as a Red Cross hospital run by Lady Grace Parry, who headed a team of nurses who lived at Hackford House; with so many young men away the facilities offered by the

billiards room were used by convalescing soldiers as part of their recreational facilities.

In 1919 Mr Bircham gave Hackford House to the parish as a war memorial and it was renamed the Bircham Institute (now the Bircham Centre).

Musically the residents of the Market Place could be an entertainment in themselves. Mr Fisher was organist at the chapel, choirmaster and also conducted glee parties. Mr Cocking played the bass fiddle and trombone, Mr Juby the violin, Mr Edward Gibbs junior the violin, piano or any other instrument he could find, and with residents from other parts of the town a string band was formed, not grand enough to be called an orchestra. Local concerts for various charities were given in the old school, Mr Peck singing in his light baritone voice, part-comic, part-sentimental songs that not always succeeded in being funny. Miss Boon was a willing accompanist and would also sing well-known ballads of the day such as *Don't Hurry* and *The Song That Reached My Heart*, accompanied on the piano by Miss Austin who lived next door and who was also pianist with the string band. Mr Austin had a rich tenor voice and could always be relied on to sing *Nirvana* or *Thora*.

Mrs Wilton and lastly the Gibbs family would sometimes help. My father was ever popular with repeated requests for one of his six or seven humorous patter songs, for some of which he had never seen the music and for which my brother would invent accompaniments.

Since my father had a gift of wit and great humour, he could always be relied on to make a racy speech of introduction or pass a vote of thanks. The elder daughter would recite and the son, with that rare gift of improvisation, would play the piano or organ and any instrument that he could find for his collection. He even invented an attachment for the piano which was like organ pedals and produced music from bells, each pedal playing one bell. The younger daughter (myself) only came into the music picture about 1913 by playing accompaniments on the piano and piano solos, and even at an early age was in great demand to sing childish songs. Throughout the war she sang in concerts for the troops. Her voice was trained but she could never pursue a musical career as intended as with the shortage of manpower she had to leave Dereham High School and make a career in the family business instead.

In 1910 with several "outsiders" from other parts of the town and surrounding district the musical gentlemen of the market place formed a highly successful minstrel troupe, calling themselves "The Black Diamonds". Mr Le Neve, the relieving officer from Dereham Road, was interlocuter, the two cornermen were my father as Bones and Mr Sidney Eglington as Tambo. The assistant cornermen were Messrs Austin and Peck. They rehearsed in the club room and were in great demand as entertainers. The troupe had a strict code of dress, with coats of black sateen and

red buttons, dark trousers with white shirts with small red bow ties; the two cornermen had cutaway evening coats, red waistcoats, very large bow ties and red stripes down their trousers; the two assistants had similar outfits but with small bow ties.

Mr Neve, the interlocuter, sat in a high chair in the middle of the back of the stage and his task was to control the overall performance; with his exaggerated bow tie, evening coat with contrasting cuffs, buttonhole and a large watch chain across his waistcoat his imposing presence left the audience in no doubt as to who was in charge!

The first major performance of the Black Diamonds was given at the fete held on 20 June 1912 at the Dereham Road home of Doctor E V Perry (now Eynsford Lodge). They had been practising hard for the previous year and had met twice a week and rehearsed in a barn a little further along Dereham Road (now part of Tylers Mead). For their premiere a covered proscenium was erected, the string band accompanied and the performance, along with the rest of the fete, was a huge success. The stage was unique in those days in that it was lighted by electricity supplied through the gardens by land line from Mr John Dixon, who at the time had the cycle shop on the corner of Towns End.

The arrangements for the fete were carried out by a committee consisting mainly of gentlemen from the Market Place, with their wives forming the tea committee. It commenced at 2 pm and with the exceptionally fine weather throughout the afternoon and evening a large number of local people were attracted and stayed and enjoyed themselves. The first part of the afternoon's proceedings were taken up by the band (which had paraded from the Market Place) and a detachment from Watts Naval Home, North Elmham, who performed various military, musical and life-saving drills. After the boys had finished their performance, they were provided with a substantial tea which was topped up with further light refreshments just before they left. By 7.15 pm a large crowd had assembled to enjoy the first part of the evening's entertainment, The Black Diamonds under the musical directorship of Mr George Storey, who was also the bandmaster of Reepham String Band. The troupe performed for more than two hours and their programme of songs and choruses, some serious, others humorous, was well received and several well-deserved encores were given. As dusk descended the garden was illuminated with hundreds of fairy lamps festooned along the paths and amongst the trees and bushes. These lamps consisted of coloured glasses about the size of a large cup, each containing a nightlight, and were lit ready for the string band which played for dancing on the lawn until well after 11 pm.

The whole affair was a great success, not least financially, and the proceeds were devoted to the Reepham and Hackford Nursing Fund.

The friendly Market Place took on a different aspect with the outbreak of war in 1914 and everything seemed changed. Market days still continued, but with less enthusiasm. Local men were either called up or volunteered for the forces, and with the arrival of troops the Market Place became a parade ground. We had army personnel here throughout the war, billeted in homes and various buildings. There was much excitement when the first troops arrived in late 1915. These were the "A" Company of the Honourable Artillery Corps. I well remember them arriving on horses with their equipment.

We were awaked by the sound of *Reveille* from the Market Place at 6.30 am and it was also sounded from various other points in the town. During the day were heard *Come to the Cook-House Door* and later, at sunset, the *Last Post*.

To the younger generation who did not realise the seriousness of war it was a thrilling sight to see the company on horseback lined up for inspection on the Market Place, probably before going around the countryside on manoeuvres, and many a child was late for school in consequence. This group of peacetime soldiers who were called up at the outbreak of war were drawn from all quarters of city life in London – stockbrokers, solicitors, actors, musicians and all grades of professional life. It was Reepham's boast that it held a very special regiment. These men entered into the village life and were very welcome guests in many homes. The officers' mess was at The Ollands and the NCOs and men were in billets. The horses were kept in various stables in the town and we had two, as well as our own horse, in ours. We had two sergeants billeted with us. One was a dentist from Hanover Square, London, who by way of contrast was the saddler sergeant. The other sergeant was a highly qualified engineer and he was the wheeler sergeant, so he was more or less dealing with machinery. Although the sergeants' mess was at Brewmere, these two invariably had their evening meal with us and became part of our family.

The very small artillery guns of the HAC were kept and guarded on the Market Place. One vivid memory of the HAC is still very much imprinted on my mind. It was New Year's Eve. We had kept open house for most of the evening for coffee and drinks for several of the officers and men with whom we had become friendly. (There seemed to be a great camaraderie amongst these troops and the various ranks mingled with each other very freely.) Nearing midnight everyone came out of their houses and a huge ring was formed entirely round the Market Place. Soldiers and civilians linked up, in rather a merry mood, and we all sang *Auld Lang Syne* and *Home Sweet Home*. For a very young teenager, taken care of by one of the sergeants of the household, this was, as I have already said, an unforgettable experience.

If the Market Place could feel it would have thrilled as it listened to about 150 folk of all ages singing the Old Year out and the New Year in. It was with much sorrow that we saw the HAC depart for active service in the spring of 1916. The Middlesex Yeomanry, with horses, followed during the next winter and the year after that the Hampshire Yeomanry arrived on bicycles and then instead of the Market Place being a parade ground with horses, we saw bicycles lined up for inspection. By this time, a small YMCA was functioning in the King's Arms club room. A succession of regiments followed and each one entered into the life of the village, although we did not have another New Year's Eve on the Market Place.

During the war several of the Market Place gentlemen were special constables and would be on duty in pairs, working on a rota system. The young generation became adept at avoiding their respective fathers, not wishing to be caught with a special army friend.

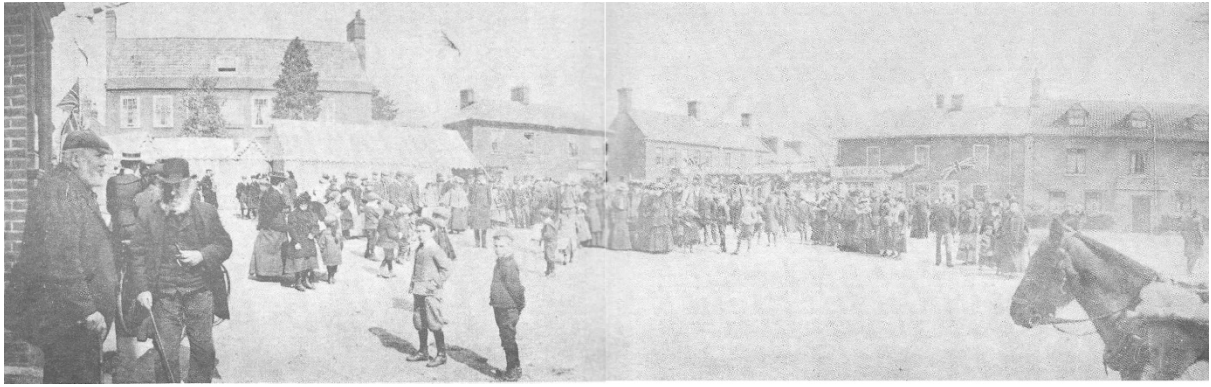
When peace was declared and Reepham was again without its troops it never seemed the same. The tone of the town had altered, some men did not return, some were crippled, some had been prisoners of war and we all felt war weary and in a much more thoughtful mood.

However, the old Market Place itself never changed and it returned to its peaceful splendour and serenity, as it is today.

Marjorie Gibbs

Editor's note: Most of this essay was originally written by Marjorie Gibbs as a contribution to a study of Reepham and the surrounding villages. While the bulk of the original article has been used, I have included some additional material, particularly that relating to the Black Diamonds and the 1912 garden fete. The inclusion of this article and the proposed changes were agreed in principle by Marjorie a few weeks before her death. I feel sure that she would have approved of the final result and that she would want me to stress her original comment that any critical remarks were not meant to be unkind in any way, but were merely a child's impressions and thoughts, seen mostly from a humorous angle.

From an article published in the Reepham Society Magazine 1993



Probably taken in the 1890s – showing the original roof line of Hall's shop (the saddler and harness maker)

REEPHAM MARKET PLACE, NORTH.



REEPHAM MARKET PLACE, SOUTH



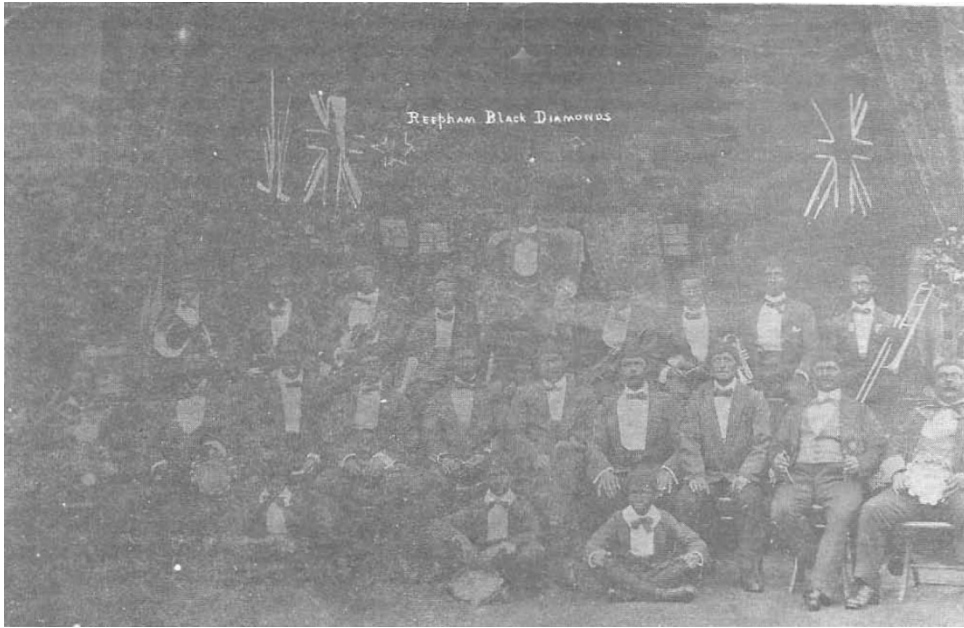
REEPHAM MARKET PLACE, EAST.



REEPHAM MARKET PLACE, WEST.



Reepham Market Place north, south, east and west before the First World War – note some of the businesses remembered by Marjorie Gibbs: Austin, Fisher, Hall, Peck and of course E. Gibbs.



The Black Diamonds in their make-up and finery ready for a performance.



1916 – Marjorie Gibbs is taking the picture in the centre foreground.



Taken in the early 1900s it shows the ivy clad church of St Michael's.